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SUBJECT: FIJI'S PRESIDENT SELECTED TO SERVE A SECOND TERM

REF: SUVA 72

Classified By: AMBASSADOR LARRY M. DINGER, REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

11. (SBU) Summary: On March 8, Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) announced the selection of Fiji's President Ratu Josefa Iloilo and Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi to serve five more years. The action follows a statement by Iloilo in early February that he was available to serve another term. For months there has been speculation that the GCC might select a President or Vice President who had been implicated in Fiji's coup of 2000. Over the last few weeks, the Fiji military has made clear that the latter outcome would be unacceptable. Behind-the-scenes maneuvering took place up to the last minute. Reportedly a group of chiefs from a portion of Iloilo's own confederacy visited him March 7 and asked him to withdraw his name. Iloilo reportedly declined the offer, and all three confederacies ultimately agreed to his selection. End Summary.

12. (U) Under Fiji's Constitution, the 55-member GCC selects a president and vice-president every five years. The GCC is composed of chiefs from each of Fiji's 14 provinces. Through an informal arrangement, the presidency and vice-presidency rotate among the three chiefly confederacies. Until recently, many thought the 85-year-old Iloilo would not seek another term, due to failing health. However, on February 2 Iloilo announced he would be available for another term. Behind-the-scenes machinations and lobbying have been intense over the last few days.

13. (C) If Iloilo did not serve another term, the northern Tovata Confederacy would be next in line for president, and the head of that confederacy, a Minister in the Qarase Government, was convicted of a 2000-coup-related crime. Fiji's military was intensely concerned that a coup-convict might become President or VP, with Commander Bainimarama publicly stating that anyone who had been convicted of coup-related charges would be unacceptable (reftel). Bainimarama went on Fijian radio as the GCC convened to issue a reminder that the stability of the country rested on Iloilo's reselection. Iloilo has been seen as supportive of Bainimarama, and refused to fire him in late 2003 despite the Prime Minister's request that he do so.

14. (C) The day before the GCC selections a group of chiefs from Iloilo's confederacy reportedly visited him and asked him to withdraw his candidacy. Iloilo reportedly refused, stating the decision rested with the GCC. Under chiefly protocol, it would have been a grave insult to Iloilo for the GCC not to reappoint him as president after he had made clear his availability. In the end, after several hours of negotiation at the GCC meeting, all three confederacies supported the proposal that the President and Vice President remain in office.

15. (C) Comment: President Iloilo's reselection will, at least for the short term, help preserve stability. Fiji's military will not use this issue to remove the Government. On the other hand, PM Qarase and a group of Fijian-nationalist chiefs must be very disappointed. They will conclude that Iloilo will continue to thwart attempts to remove Bainimarama. Retaining highly-regarded Vice President Madraiwiwi in office keeps him available as ultimate mediator between the Government and military. Many doubt that Iloilo will be physically capable of serving another five years. If he leaves office, the Constitution requires a new GCC selection process for his replacement. For now though, with elections looming in May, political stability at the top will send welcome signals to most of the populace. End comment.
DINGER